PRESBYTERY OF CHICAGO

JANUARY 8, 2002

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FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

As I drove out here – I found myself longing for the day when the Presbytery of Chicago has to call a special meeting to discuss new church development, or an exciting new initiative in urban ministry, or evangelism — or simply to get together to worship God and celebrate our life together.

And I thought about what I always think about in this circumstance — namely July 5 and 6, 1996, when it was my responsibility to preside over the General Assembly that put an amendment into our Book of Order that has dominated our life together and changed us and divided us against one another as nothing has done in decades. And I thought about traveling — that year to visit Presbyteries and congregations and experiencing first hand how deeply divided we were — the pain, the tears, the anger and bitterness and knowing in my heart, that it was only the beginning.

We are a divided church and while that is not particularly new — it is tragic, a tragic waste of our intellectual, spiritual and financial resources — at a critical

moment in the life of our culture, when we need to make our witness and to stand together.

It is not new for Presbyterians to be arguing. But, as Gary Demmarest — the Co-moderator of the new General Assembly Task Force, put it recently, "Conflict does not need to be combat."

Presbyterians have a tradition, unfortunately, of resolving their differences by splitting. John Calvin wrote to the Archbishop of Canterbury that he would sail seven oceans if it would serve the cause of the unity of the church. His ecclesiastical sons and daughters have distinguished themselves by resolving conflicts by excommunicating one another, walking away from one another, pulling apart, pushing one another out. In Korea, the site of our most effective missionary efforts, there are today more than 80 Presbyterian denominations.

We are a divided family and the question before our church is quite simply, can we hold together through this most recent difference and conflict — which has so tragically divided us, divided to the degree that we have begun to define one another on the basis of where we stand; begun to organize and mount strategies to take over, win back, or leave the church on the basis of this issue: begin to demonize one another on this basis – words like apostate, termites was a term used at the Coalition meeting last fall to describe people like me who

have arrived at a position on this issue based on our reading of scripture and our attempt to live faithfully, reflecting the mind of Christ as we know it: "termites" he said, termites that are stamped out and then come back again next year.

There is another way to be church — there is another way to live through this conflict.

Amendment 01-A would simply remove from our Book of Order a paragraph that — was not there for the first 205 years or so of our history, inserted in 1996. The amendment takes no position on the issue of homosexuality, or the fitness or unfitness of gay and lesbian persons to serve as church officers. It simply returns us to when we were for all of our history prior to 1996, namely trusting Presbyteries and Sessions to make faithful decisions about leadership. That's not apostasy — that's Presbyterian.

Amendment 01-A does not require any Presbytery or Session to ordain or install anyone that Presbytery or Session deems unfit.

Amendment 01-A simply means that the people of the Glen Ellyn church have the right and privilege of decided who to ordain and install as deacons without the approval of the people of Fourth Church and vice versa.

Amendment 01-A is not about marriage. It certainly does not undercut or change how Presbyterians think

about marriage. Marriage is a gift of God — in the wonderful words of the Book of Confession:

> **"The relationship between man and woman exemplifies in a basic way God's ordering of the interpersonal life for which He created humankind."**

Marriage – we clergy say ever Saturday afternoon is — God's good gift.

> **"God created us male and female and gave us marriage for the full expression of love between a man and a woman. In marriage a man and a woman freely give themselves to each other."**

Presbyterians know what marriage is.

Amendment 01-A is not about Biblical authority. Among the charges leveled against it and those of us who support it, I am distressed and insulted most by the suggestion that to arrive at our position, one has to ignore the clear sense of scripture. That simply is not true. There is, in our Presbyterian tradition, a wonderful assumption that people of good will and honest faith, will on occasion disagree with one another; will come to different conclusions about what scripture says and what scripture means by what is says. Each side has its list of Biblical scholars — to support its position and, guess what, they disagree. There is a difference of opinion about what

scripture says and what it means by what it says. Our list – 33 members of the Biblical faculties at our Presbyterian Seminaries claims to be a majority. No matter – the fact is that Princeton's Patrick Miller disagrees with Dubuque's Paul Achtemeir.

To disagree about scriptural interpretation is one of our most precious freedoms. If your conclusion is different from mine I have no right to suggest that you are ignoring the authority of the Bible.

This debate is about how a national church, a precious family of Reformed/Presbyterian faith with its roots deeply embedded in American culture can live through its own internal division.

Does it matter? I happen to believe it does. I believe the unity of the church is as important as its peace and purity. I believe there is an evangelical imperative at stake here — contained in Jesus' own prayer that we be one so that the world may know the one who sent him.

I was a political science major in college and I learned that when the body is divided, when a substantial part of the family disagrees with the majority — the body as family — a church can do one of two things —

The majority can coerce the minority to comply with the majority's opinion — in which case the minority can either:

comply — which sometimes it simply cannot do and be true to itself, or lie and pretend that it is complying or

leave

There is another way to do it; however.

Sometimes the majority and the minority find a way to live together.

Sometimes the body finds a way to respect the conscience and convictions of all its members.

This is the way of freedom.

Our Presbyterian Constitution calls us to exhibit "mutual forbearance toward each other on matters with respect to which men and women of good character and principles, may differ." (G.1.0305)

Amendment 01-A is a way to do just that.